TO CELEBRATE A LIFE

A personal and dignified funeral ceremony for those who have chosen to live without religion.

British Humanist Association

THE DEATH OF SOMEONE CLOSE TO YOU

The death of a close relative or friend can be a bitter experience for any of us. Although we may sense that time can eventually soothe our grief, the present feeling of shock and loss is very real.

The funeral should help family and friends to express and share their sadness. It is likely to be the last opportunity when together they will be focusing their thoughts on the person who has died. The ceremony deserves to be remembered as an occasion which uniquely and affectionately honoured that person's life, and for that it needs to capture the essence of their personality.

The Funeral Director will deal with all the practical arrangements, but it is up to you to indicate what kind of funeral ceremony you would like.

WHO MIGHT PREFER A NON-RELIGIOUS FUNERAL?

While churchgoers and others committed to a religious faith will normally want a minister or religious leader to officiate, there are more and more people for whom religion is less important or who have made a clear decision to live their lives without it.

For them, a religious funeral service may seem insincere and bring little consolation. It may not feel the right way to say their final farewell to someone who did not accept the religious view of life and death. In this case it is likely to have more warmth and meaning if the ceremony is of the kind favoured by the British Humanist Association's officiants.

WHO ARE HUMANISTS?

Humanists care deeply about moral issues, but from a non-religious standpoint, and our outlook has a very long history.

We believe in the good that is in human beings, and the right of the individual to free choice in the main decisions of life and death. We hold that humanity must find solutions to problems from within itself, not rely on the supernatural.

WHAT SORT OF PEOPLE ARE OFFICIANTS?

Humanist officiants come from a variety of backgrounds. What they share is an ability to empathise with the experience of bereavement. They are men and women familiar with the procedures of cremation and burial. They need to be good interviewers and attentive listeners; sensitive to the family's wishes yet ready to give clear guidance as needed; able to prepare and take charge of a solemn public occasion.

Whatever the circumstances of the life and death, officiants are not there to moralise or judge – but to understand. Together with you they can plan a personal and dignified funeral ceremony, and conduct it for you on the day if that is your wish.

THE CEREMONY

Once you have arranged to have a non-religious humanist ceremony, your officiant will wish to speak with you, and ideally meet you and possibly others closely affected by the death. It is helpful for the officiant to get to know as much as possible about the person

who has died; for each ceremony is different and highly individual, even if the form of it may seem quite simple.

Members of the family or friends can, if they wish, participate with a reading or a poem, or with their own tribute. It all helps make the occasion more personal and special.

MUSIC

Music can speak direct to the emotions and can often be a poignant way of reflecting the personality of the one who has died. Usually an organist is available, and many crematoria have facilities for playing tape cassettes or CDs. This gives you considerable freedom of choice, and the officiant can advise on what may be appropriate.

WHAT MIGHT OTHERS THINK?

Above all, the kind of ceremony you choose must be right and appropriate for the person who has died and for the close family. You need not be concerned that anything in the ceremony might offend anyone who perhaps still feels uneasy about a non-religious funeral; the object is not to be hostile to religious beliefs, merely to focus in a sincere way on the reality of the life that has ended. Most officiants will also include in the ceremony a short period for quiet reflection, and that gives anyone who wants it an opportunity for silent prayer.

People often say afterwards how moving, sincere and fitting they found the ceremony. For the immediate family and close friends it will be a great comfort to have provided a ceremony such as the person who has died would have wanted.

SOME PRACTICAL POINTS

1. The British Humanist Association has a national network of accredited officiants, organised into nine Regions. The back panel of this leaflet explains how you can contact someone for help or advice, and gives details of a BHA booklet which could be particularly useful if you wish to prepare the ceremony yourself.
2. If at all possible, the Funeral Director or you should contact an officiant before the date and time of the funeral are arranged, to ensure that he or she can be available.
3. Non-religious funerals have the same status in civil law as religious ones. They are ever more familiar in public crematoria and cemeteries, and to Funeral Directors whose first concern is the wishes of the family.
4. The officiant normally receives a fee similar to that of a minister. The Funeral Director handles the payment and will put it on the bill as one of the 'disbursements'.
5. The BHA's accredited officiants are subject to a code of conduct covering such matters as visiting the family beforehand if at all possible, acceptable dress for the funeral, free provision of a script copy afterwards if one is asked for, and so on.
6. If the decision you are making concerns your own eventual funeral, please ensure that whoever is likely to be organising it knows what you want. It is not enough to request it in your will; that might not be read in time to make the arrangements.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

Usually the Funeral Director will contact an officiant for you if that is what you choose; but you are welcome to make your own enquiries, raising any questions you may have about a non-religious ceremony. The BHA (see below on this panel) can put you in touch with a local contact: just cite the first part of the postcode for the locality required. If the details of a contact have been inserted immediately below here, you may of course get in touch with that person direct.

The BHA can provide free general information on humanism. It also has a book for those who may themselves be devising a non-religious funeral. *Funerals without God* (88 pages) offers practical guidance, sample ceremonies, suitable prose and verse readings, advice on music and much other useful material. It may be bought in bookshops or direct, by telephone and credit card if desired, for £4.50 + 50p postage, from:

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